HAZARD

By HUGH POLLARD

THE little group of men in the club room had been discussing matters that they loosely termed psychology, and the talk developed into a heated argument upon the question of bravery in war. The disputants were eminent civilians, but their age had spared them first-hand experience of the present war.

A young man, a Major in a Territorial battalion, was sitting near the group, and the lure of khaki was too strong for one of the speakers to resist. "What do you say, Major?" said he. "Have you found what our friend here calls 'the consciousness of moral right' the great incentive to bravery in the field?"

"I am afraid I do not know enough about the men's minds to answer that," said the Major, "but I can tell you of an incident, and leave the decision to you."

"In the ordinary way, you understand, personal valor does not much matter; some men I know are literally fearless, they do not experience what we call the emotion of fear at all, because, so far as I can understand them, their minds cannot form the image of anything unpleasant happening to themselves. The majority are not in this happy case, and do most certainly know fear, yet the fellows one would have imagined could never have stood up to the strain of modern battle fighting manage to get through with it, though many a man has told me that he felt all the time as if he were unreal—as if these terrors were happening to him in a dream.

"In the normal way the soldier's valor is not put to any moral test, for there is no choice. He simply has to go on with the rest, accomplishing his duty and taking luck as he may find it. The real test only comes in extraordinary cases, and then usually to officers rather than to men.

"One of the worst moments in a man's life is when he has to decide if it is his duty to persevere in a tight corner or whether the right thing to do is to retire and save casualties. The fear of being thought a coward may then turn a man into a fool, or the fear of being thought a fool—a criminal waster of men's lives—may turn a man into a coward.

"The incident I propose to lay before you narrows the problem to even finer limits than that. Towards the end of the third war winter we had developed a system of large-scale trench raids in which two battalions would take part. At that time the battalion to which I was attached was a more or less composite unit made up of men and officers drafted from several regiments.

"Among our company commanders were Shaw and Martin—those are not their real names, of course, but they will serve for the purpose of this story. They had been with us several weeks, and had got on very well—for we had a spell of pretty hard fighting, quite enough to show the stuff both of them were made of, and, so far as personal valor in the field went, I do not think there was a penny-piece difference between them. Honors then were not so thick as they are now, but I believe the O. C. had sent both their names up for recognition.

"Shaw was a confirmed card player, and at the time the whole battalion was mad on cards. You know how crazes run through a crowd like that; one month it will be jig-saw puzzles, then souvenirs will be all the rage, or a new card game or some similar diversion. Martin, too, played like the rest of us, and we had recently abandoned bridge for poker, which was raging for the moment all through the Division. The two men were not in any way close friends, yet there was nothing of hostility in their attitude towards one another. Fellows in the trenches get pretty sick of one another's company, anyway, and an active service mess is never an absolute Agapemone. Still, as I say, there was no bad blood—not even jealousy or friction of any kind.

"About three o'clock in the afternoon we were in the Battalion Headquarters' dug-out—a nice roomy shelter that sedulous Germans had dug deep down in the chalk, and which served us better than it had its former occupants. The Acting Adjutant had called an officers' conference on the raid we were to make that night, and, after the time and all details had been settled, he explained that owing to recent heavy losses in officers, "Corps" had decided that company commanders were to be economized, and that even in big brigade raids such as this only two company commanders were to go with each battalion, while in minor raids only two subalterns per company were to be allowed. The C. O., he went on, had not detailed any special company commanders for the night's duty, and suggested that the fairest means of deciding would be for the officers concerned to draw lots.

"We turned the subalterns out to get the N. C. O.'s together, and some one suggested drawing our tickets from a hat.

"'No,' said Shaw. 'It's a good gamble. Let's cut the cards for it. Any one object?'

"The suggestion was deemed excellent, and somebody produced a pocket case with two packs in it. Shaw, as our leading card expert, acted as master of the ceremonies.

"'Better cut for order of drawing,' he said, and the group drew their cards.

"'Now, gentlemen,' he said, 'are we all agreed; rules according to Hoyle, and the winners of the highest cards go with the raiders?' There was a little chorus of assent as he remade the pack and flirted it out fan-wise upon the crude table.

"The first man drew the seven of diamonds and turned it face upward upon the table without comment. The second player seemed to hesitate a moment in his choice, dabbed with a finger, and turned up the king of hearts. 'Beat that if you can,' he said. Shaw drew the knave of clubs, and